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SENSITIVE  
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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/SPG AND AF/RSA  
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: Ethiopian Government Builds Case Against VOA

Summary:

1. (SBU) Ethiopian State Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Tekeda Alemu asked the Ambassador May 4 if the United States has now taken an anti-Ethiopia position and Ethiopia is no longer considered an ally of the United States in the region or in counterterrorism programs. Tekeda based his question on Voice of America (VOA) reporting, which he said reflects the views of the U.S. Government and, Tekeda claimed, has "given a platform to unsubstantiated and outrageous anti-Ethiopian views." Tekeda specifically referred to a recent VOA report that originated in Washington and featured former State Department official Greg Stanton, now of Genocide Watch, who charged that Prime Minister Meles and the Ethiopian government should be investigated for possible acts of genocide by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in Somalia and in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somalia region.

2. (SBU) Tekeda said the Ethiopian Government also found highly offensive a series of VOA interviews, aired over the past few days, of major opposition leader Berhanu Nega, now an associate professor at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, who denounced the recent arrest in Addis Ababa of 35 current and former military officers and others for allegedly plotting to assassinate Ethiopian leaders and to encourage public violence against the government (septel). Local press reported that the 35 belong to Berhanu's Ginbot 7 organization. Tekeda said the VOA has given Berhanu, whom he labeled "a criminal who could be a terrorist," a platform to air his views to promote violence, and Tekeda underscored that the evidence against Berhanu that will be produced during the upcoming trial of the 35 suspects. Tekeda said no Ethiopian government official was interviewed prior to or in conjunction with the interviews with Berhanu. Tekeda also raised the issue of possible extradition talks with the United States, though he added that the Ethiopian Diaspora in the United States would put up such a vocal opposition as to pressure the U.S. Congress to oppose any formal extradition agreement. Dr. Tekeda said the Ethiopian Government was not taking any action against the VOA, but wanted the new Africa team at the State Department to understand Ethiopia's depth of frustration with VOA reporting. End Summary.

VOA Reflects a Changed U.S. Posture to Ethiopia

3. (SBU) Tekeda called in the Ambassador on May 4 to protest officially VOA reporting which the Ethiopian government (GoE) found highly offensive and outrageous because of allegedly unsubstantiated information being reported by VOA. Specifically, Tekeda said the GoE objected to VOA's recent interview with Berhanu Nega, a leading opposition figure in exile, who may "be deemed a terrorist" by the GoE in the upcoming trial of 35 suspects arrested for plotting to

assassinate Ethiopian leaders and to spread violence. Tekeda said the GoE was unhappy that VOA gave Berhanu "credibility" as well as a platform to air his "anti-Ethiopian" views. Tekeda asked if the United States had now changed its policy towards Ethiopia and no longer considers Ethiopia an ally in the region, in counterterrorism programs and peacekeeping operations, where Ethiopia contributes military forces to operations throughout Africa.

¶4. (SBU) Tekeda reiterated that the 35 suspects are tied to Berhanu's Ginbot 7 opposition group. Tekeda noted that no Ethiopian official was interviewed prior to or in conjunction with the interview with Berhanu and that VOA gave only brief references to press statements by the Ethiopian Government. Tekeda said upcoming trials for the 35 suspects may reveal the connection between Berhanu and the 35 suspects and that Berhanu could be involved in "possible terrorist activities." The charges are so serious that Tekeda raised deep concerns that the VOA, which Ethiopia considers to be an arm of the USG, is giving credibility to a potential terrorist suspect.

¶5. (SBU) Tekeda also raised briefly the VOA report of charges by Greg Stanton, a former State Department official and now head of Genocide Watch. In a recent VOA broadcast that originated in Washington, Stanton said that Prime Minister Meles could potentially be brought up on charges of crimes against humanity or genocide stemming from ENDF operations in Somalia and the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali region. Tekeda called VOA decision to air such "unsubstantiated" reports outrageous, and wondered aloud how the United States could encourage such reporting from VOA. After the Stanton report initially appeared, the GoE Office of Government Communications suspended the press credentials of the two VOA Amharic service reporters resident in Ethiopia. They reversed the decision several days later and returned

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the credentials.

Extradition

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¶6. (SBU) Tekeda raised the possibility of renewing talks over entering a bilateral extradition treaty. He speculated that such talks would probably go nowhere because the Ethiopian Diaspora in the United States "is so vocal that the U.S. Congress would be compelled to oppose any talks on extraditing suspected criminals."

Comment:

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¶7. (SBU) Tekeda concluded that the Ethiopian government was not taking any action against the VOA at this time, but wanted the new Africa team in Washington to understand the GoE's level of frustration and anger with VOA reporting. More ominous is the continued drumbeat and statements from all levels of the GoE, and particularly the ruling party's powerful executive committee, that indicates a profound belief among GoE leadership that the U.S. has changed its policy towards Ethiopia, that the Ethiopian Government needs to brace itself for a tougher U.S. posture towards Ethiopia, and that Ethiopia accordingly needs to develop better relations with third countries to hedge against a souring of U.S.-Ethiopia bilateral relations. We hope that senior bilateral meetings, now being discussed in Washington, will help ease anxieties in Addis and improve relations. Managing Ethiopia's apparent paranoia will be difficult. At the heart of the paranoia is the long-troubled relationship with VOA Amharic service, where the GoE believes the employees have close ties to the opposition and are not balanced in their reporting, and the GoE's own reluctance to embrace genuine press freedom. End Comment.

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